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Figure and Environment

Carol Davis

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Figure and Environment
.....Carol Davis.....

Candidate for the Master of Fine Arts
in the College of Fine and Applied Arts
of the Rochester Institute of Technology

August 2, 1968
Mr. Philip Bornarth, Advisor

for Mother

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Introduction

I. Purpose of Thesis: The purpose of this thesis will be to explore figure and environmental relationships in painting, through the combined application of acrylic paint and the spray - stencil.

II. Scope of Thesis: Research will include an investigation of historical and contemporary attitudes towards figurative painting, with special emphasis placed on the development of the flat, two - dimensional image. Texts, periodicals, and catalogues from exhibitions will be utilized. I will complete a series of six paintings, each being no smaller than 36" x 45". These paintings will be executed through the application of a variety of techniques. I will focus on the combination of flat, acrylic painted surfaces and sprayed metallic and non - metallic stencils. Some pencil drawing, flocking, and special collage effects will also be included.

III. Procedures: The summer quarter is a short one, and I consequently feel the necessity of doing extensive preliminary preparation for the thesis. My canvases will be stretched and primed prior to

II

the beginning of the quarter, and I shall be commencing my research for the project this week. (May 20, 1968). I will complete the major portion of the painting and the rough draft for the thesis report by the fourth week of the quarter. The remaining two weeks will be devoted to revising the report, photographing the paintings, and preparing them for exhibition.

IV: Alternate Proposals:

1. "Mechanistic Abstractions"
2. "Neo - Realistic Environments"

Exposition

The series of paintings completed for the master's thesis have not evolved from specific references to aesthetic strategies, past or present. I am therefore quite unable to classify them. For this reason I have chosen to label them simply as figure - environmental problems, alluding only to their pictorial content, rather than forcing analogies with other schools of thought. That I have been influenced by contemporary aesthetic values, however, is implicit in the work. Yet the historic antecedents leading to the actual production of these paintings are not easily chronicled.

In developing an explanation for the thesis paintings, I shall first seek to briefly sketch the evolution of one facet of my work - the two - dimensional, non - plastic figure. Because I could not possibly hope to cover this subject in its entirety, I shall only include research that

has generally interested me. I shall then follow with an investigation of technique, and conclude with a critique of my work.

All figurative painters, past and present, are engaged in the art of translation. Those who have worked in two dimensions have sought to master the various devices which can create an illusion of space. In 'primitive' cultures, however, one notes the absence of illusionistic continuity. In the iconography of the Early Christian and Byzantine artists, the vase and mural painting of Archaic Greece, the hieroglyphs of the Egyptians, Eskimo and African Art, painting is essentially drawing filled in with solid, flat, color. The gradual discovery of depth and modeling of space replaced this stylistic mark in most Western cultures. Yet the simplicity and beauty of this non - visual attitude to spacial form and orientations has been rediscovered by the Twentieth Century artist. A growing technology has made it possible for these styles to be researched by the modern painter.

Besides an abiding interest in primitive forms of expression, I have found ideas for my

work in paintings of Matisse, Leger, (Stuart) Davis, and Wesselmann. Matisse's nudes are diagrams. He simplifies and flattens forms, and reduces them to essential patterns. Leger's robust, tubular, cubist forms, metallic surfaces, and garish color have also influenced my thinking. His interests were reflective of a growing technological society, as witnessed in his writings when he states: "For me the human figure is no more important than keys or bicycles."¹ Stuart Davis concentrated his vision on the urban, out - of - doors, and reconstitutes it by means of variation on cubist environments. Wesselmann's girls are products of contemporary Americana, that "long - finned, big - breasted, one born every minute society."² Wesselmann's nudes will be a contour, with signals for lips, nipples, and hair; one sign in an array of signs.

I have also drawn suggestions from the works of other contemporary painters, besides Wesselmann. The flat figures of David Hockney; D. Holbrook's grid painting - each square containing details of girls and their underwear; the bizarre Pop fantasies of Richard Lindner's zoftik women; the twisted, rubber contours of Francis Bacon's nudes; the diffused

¹ L. Lippman, Pop Art, p. 20
² Ibid, p. 11

figure - ground drawings and paintings of Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Karl Wirsum; the large abstractions of Valerio Adami: directly - or indirectly - all have served to influence my thinking about my own work.

The invention of the photographic process helped serve to revolutionize thought in the traditional arts.

The painter could no longer depict a world that had been much photographed. He turned, instead, to reveal the inner process of creativity in expressionism and in abstract art. Likewise, the novelist could no longer describe objects or happenings for readers who already knew what was happening by photo, press, film, and radio...Thus art moved from outer matching to inner making.³

My choice to represent the figure as a two - dimensional, non - plastic entity can be viewed as a reaction against the recorded photographic illusion. The choice is a swing towards subjectivity, towards presenting a creative process for public participation.

Yet I do refer to photographic sources for my work, as do many contemporary artists. Each artist, however, uses subject matter and content differently.

When Warhol and Rausch use photos they are printed from silkscreens...which can be used again. Artschwager uses photographs to work from, but he transfers them by hand. The paintings of Joe Raffaele are derived from photos in magazines, but they are of unique and/or anonymous situations.⁴

³ M. McLuhan, Understanding Media, p. 174

⁴ L. Alloway, "Art as Likeness", Arts, p. 20

I use photographic source material for subject matter and as an inspiration for technique. The nudes of Bill Brandt, greatly distorted, flattened, and foreshortened through his use of the 20mm, wide angle lens, suggested an image for the "Formula V" painting. Other details from his photos have been translated into my work.

Because I do work from aluminum and black spray cans, pencil drawing, and taped or stenciled edges, my paintings often resemble the photograph or the photoengraving. This effect originally was accidental, but I realized the potential for organizing spatial contrasts with the flat acrylic painted surfaces. My reaction to the combination of techniques is similar to Wesselmann's. To quote:

One thing I like about collage is that you can use anything which gives you that kind of variety; it sets up reverberations in a picture from one kind of reality to another.⁵

The decision to begin investigating media other than acrylics was made early in my second quarter of painting. I had found myself, at that point, thoroughly bored with my work. And, after stumbling through fifteen or twenty exhibits

⁵ T. Jacobson, "What is Pop Art?", Art in America, p. 40

in New York galleries during Christmas vacation, I began to feel the necessity for change...and, moreover, I knew how I would make it. I was very much attracted to the work of the New York Pop painters. My facination was not so much centered on their choice of subject, but rather in their exploitation of commercial techniques. Industrial materials like formica, neon, chrome, Day - Glo and aluminum paints, plastics, acetate, Ben Day dot screens, automotive enamels - all these characterized the new art.

The central novelty and perhaps most fruitful aspect of Pop Art consists not in its concentration of common objects (which provided material for earlier generations), nor in its questioning of the nature of the relationship between depiction of reality, but in its sanction of advertising, illustration, and commercial art conventions as well as techniques for the presentation of these, or any other figurative subjects in the context of high art.⁶

In this technical sense my paintings do correspond with the work of the Pop artists. Yet I do not classify them as 'Pop'. I have consistently greeted my work as formal, aesthetic problems in composition and technique. I quote from mass - media or mass - produced sources. My focus is not on chosing desirable Pop subjects, common objects or popular cultural topics. I

⁶ N. Marmer, "Pop Art in California", Pop Art, p. 148

do not ascribe to any particular humanistic or
satirical goals in my painting.

Stockpiling my stencils for the paintings was truly a chance operation. Most of them are found (sometimes stolen) objects. Some of the stencils used were kindly donated by enlightened scavengers. Only a very few had to be purchased - e.g. the large, diamond patterned grid and the doilies. My collection was nearly complete even before I commenced any painting. I relied on manipulating the stock of 'givens' rather than having to invent, and then secure, stencil patterns as I progressed. I liked the challenge posed by this particular kind of approach: with 'x' number of givens, 'y' number of controlled variables (color and tonality), and One Absolute (a nude), I could anticipate 'z' number of results. Naturally, the operation was never so schematic. Yet I did operate - to a degree - within a system. My aim: clarity and strong design. The stencils used most often are illustrated and described in the back of this book.

I approach a painting directly, without the

aide of preliminary sketches or diagrams. Occasionally I do have a general idea for the positioning of a figure, but this, too, is subject to change. I have found that translating drawing into painting is a tedious endeavor. It bores me. To expand an idea, already complete, into painting oftentimes is necessary. For my work, it is not.

My approach to the thesis paintings has been fairly consistent. I would first stencil in the major divisions of the picture plane with then layers of aluminum and black enamel spray. This technique - direct, rapid - offered me maximum flexibility. The near - transparency of these sprayed preliminary divisions could be easily covered. If satisfied with the arrangement of the first stenciled forms, I would proceed to add further layers of spray, slowly building the composition. After I was able to calculate the basic environmental structure for the painting, I would add the color areas. The color was included only after I was certain of the composition, for I did not want to destroy the immaculate quality of the surface by having to overpaint mistakes. I found that I had to apply at least two coats of the acrylic paint,

in order to insure an even, brilliant surface. I oftentimes taped the edges, and sealed them with polymer medium. I found that this defining and 'locking up' of the color in static, sharp areas charged the paintings with energy. Once the color was applied, and adjustments were made, I would return to the spray cans and stencil in detailed overlays, and conclude with a few finishing touches in color.

I prefer adhering to the primary colors rather than exploring more sophisticated schemes. I like them because of their simplicity, and I feel that they work consistently with the aluminum and black sprays to achieve a newly minted, commercially produced aura. As Matisse once remarked:

Thus it is that simple colors can act upon the inner feelings because they are simple. A Blue, for example, accompanied by the shimmer of its complementary, acts upon the feelings like a gong.⁷

The same with red and yellow, and the artist should be able to sound them when he needs them.

I am also struck by the banality of the pink - silvergray combination. This one fascination of mine, I'll admit, does suggest something very

⁷ H. Seldnis, "Matisse in Los Angeles", Art In America, p. 30

close to the directives of the Pop artists. But, again, exposing the banal or bizarre is not my primary purpose. In the late '50's the whole of Americana dressed itself in pink and gray. I thought it ghastly then. I still do, actually, and I intend to exploit it to its fullest.

Conclusion

Hopefully, my work stands as a strong enough testimonial to the progress I've made. I see no reason for laboring that point here. Instead, I'll briefly discuss ideas for future work, and the direction I'll be taking as a result of the discoveries made in the thesis.

I shall continue to use stencil - sprays and acrylics, only I will be working on plastic. Uvex, a Kodak product, is relatively inexpensive and exhibits all the characteristics of plexiglass. It can be heated and then molded in a vacuum press. I am going to first work on the flat, transparent sheets, and if I'm satisfied with those results, I'll move into forming them.

I want to take advantage of the transparent ground. This is the main reason for moving from canvas to plastic. The application of a thin layer of lacquer spray does not form an opaque surface, and I want to be able to work surfaces

behind a single sheet. What I intend to do is sandwich three, or even four, Uvex sheets together, with a separate image developed on each surface. I might confine each technique to separate surfaces, or mix them simultaneously for added effect. Each individual sheet, then, will contribute to the final image. When placed up to each other, the layering will serve to create a very strange spatial illusion.

The work will still include the human form. This year I learned how to make a photo-silkscreen transfer from a negative. (An example of this is illustrated in the back). I shall attempt to screen these photographic images on the Uvex. The resulting image will constitute one of the plastic layers. The only problem I can anticipate thusfar will be a monetary one. The scale of my work will probably have to be considerably reduced.

Such is life.

Visuals...

"Polka Dotty Polks"

3 3/4' x 5'

Acrylic, lacquer spray, pencil

This painting is my first effort at combining the stencil - spray with acrylics. I attempted to keep the composition simple so that I might focus my attention on technique. The painting, though, is not without technical flaws. The painted edges are sloppy and imprecise, and the thin veils of silver spray are so subtle that they are only barely discernable - and are often lost. "Dotty" is a restrained effort, yet the cautiousness with which I approached the painting enabled me to overcome a tendency towards including superfluous embellishment. The simplicity of the painting is its success.



"The Bride Stripped Bare by the Air Force Even"

4' x 5'
Acrylic, spray,
pencil, gold buff

I originally designed this painting as a vertical composition. I discovered, however, that the shift towards a horizontal position offered me many more possibilities for developing a dynamic, assymetrical composition. The transfer from the vertical to the horizontal left me to contend with the problem of stationing a now - reclining figure to the picture plane. This I attempted to solve by adding some weight to the lady's left (lower) thigh. The result - a massive area of black spray - still does not quite solve the problem. It appears a bit heavy - handed; the amorphous nature of the form conflicts with the controlled, deliniated, surfaces of the rest of the canvas. The composition needs further solidification.

I am pleased, however, with some of the technical effects of the painting. Through only the slightest suggestion of contour, I managed to achieve a real feeling of depth and weight in the modeling of the figure. And, too, the ambiguity of contrasting plastic and non - plastic forms, as they weave through each other, is a successful effect.



'Songs of Innocence'
(homage to William Blake)

-Acrylic, spray, pencil,
gold buff, tape
3½' x 5'

I have long admired the literary and artistic accomplishments of Blake and desired to re-create a bit of his spirit in this painting. Whether I succeeded or not is probably a question best left to the academicians. But some of the 'Innocence' imagery is characteristically his, although translated into a contemporary motif.

As I gained knowledge about technique, my paintings started to become increasingly more complex. The multi-faceted imagery in 'Songs', reminiscent of a Medieval pastorate, machinery, and mystic incantation, coalesces - and forms a very strange painting, indeed. It is, then, the content of 'Songs' which pleases me most. And because of the stirring juxtaposition of imagery, which does somehow manage to relate, 'Songs' has a very different meaning for me. It transcends the level of a formal problem in design.



"Norwegian Nana"

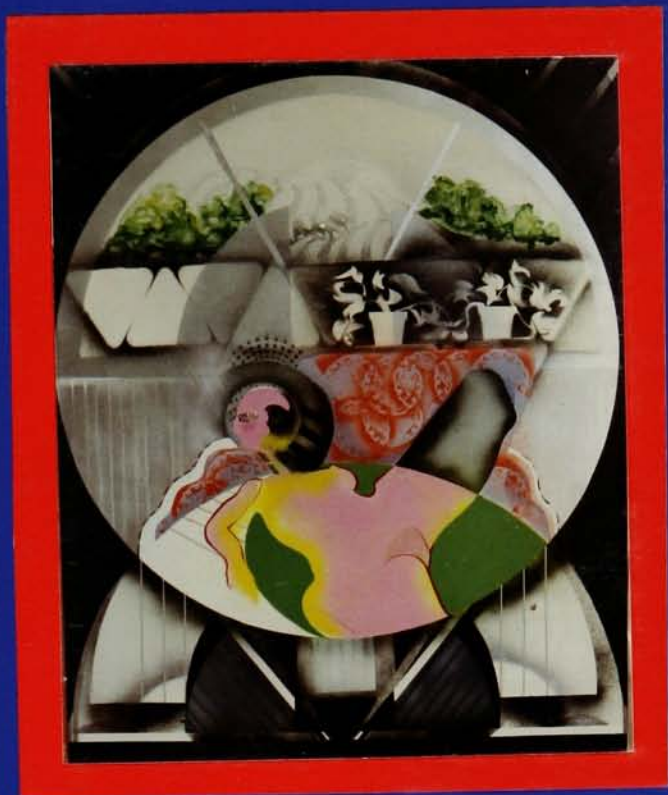
4' x 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ '

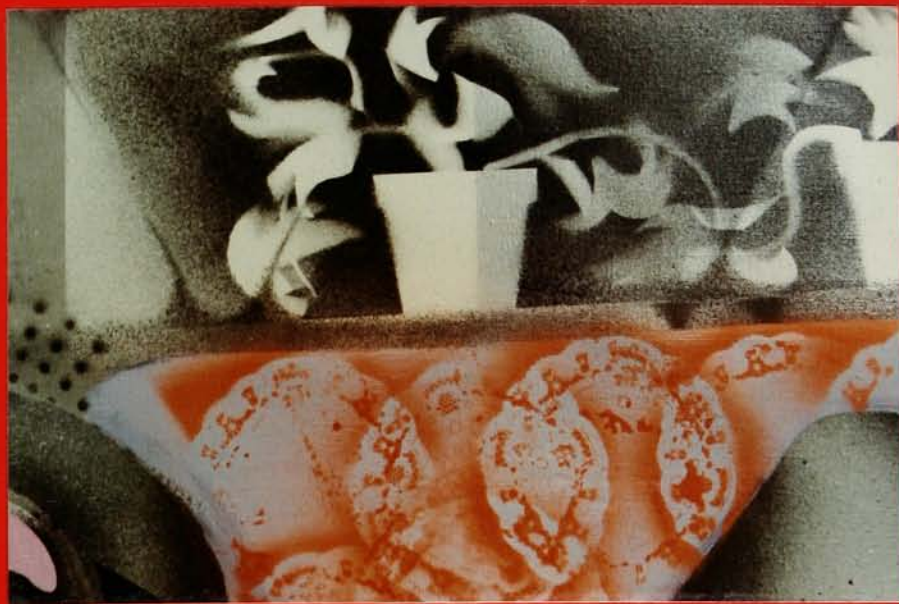
Acrylic, spray, pencil,
tape, flocking

Details on following page.

"Nana", alas, is a problem child. My interest in expanding the structural complexity of a canvas was her demise. This painting perfectly illustrates my aforementioned statement : that unless I carefully check myself, I can easily launch myself into adding unnecessary embellishment.

Not that this painting doesn't have some very interesting areas. The problem is that there are simply too many of them, resulting in conflict and confusion. The figure and surrounding environment battle for attention. In most my work, figure - ground relationships are diffused, the figure serving only as a component with a larger compositional superstructure. "Nana" is simply too assertive for her own good.





"Formula V"

4' x 4'

Acrylic, lacquer and
Day - Glo spray

Details on following page

Working on this painting was nothing less than sheer delight...a. I could forget about "Norwegian Nana"...b. I had a suggestion for a figure already at hand, thanks to a Bill Brant photo... c. Working on a shape other than a rectangle opened up numerous fresh ideas for compositional problem solving...d. I had recently acquired a veritable arsenal of Day - Glo sprays.

Attempting to simplify, again, I turned to a near - symmetrical design. I felt that the diamond - shaped picture plane almost called for this formalism.

"Formula V" is, no doubt, one of my most successful paintings. Oftentimes I suspect that a painting is not quite completed, although I have pronounced it to be so. This, naturally, comes from a gnawing dissatisfaction with what is already there. I feel no such anxiety about this painting.





"Gluteal Pilot"

4' x 5'

Acrylic, lacquer spray

My original idea for this painting was to illustrate the distorted perception one has of his body while plunging through space in free - fall. I had been listening to sky-divers relate their experiences..."The features of your face are pushed in. You are certain you no longer have a nose; your head is a concave. And your outstretched arms swing into infinity. One cannot possibly judge the relative position of one's hands."

I found, though, that trying to force a more literal transcription of this experience in painting countered my ambition to fuse figure and ground in abstraction. So I discarded the idea of association, and worked on developing an emblematic design, ambiguous and esoteric.

Compositionally, this painting is strong. The inventiveness of form is more apparent here than in my other work. The color, however, falls short; it does not match the strength of the design.



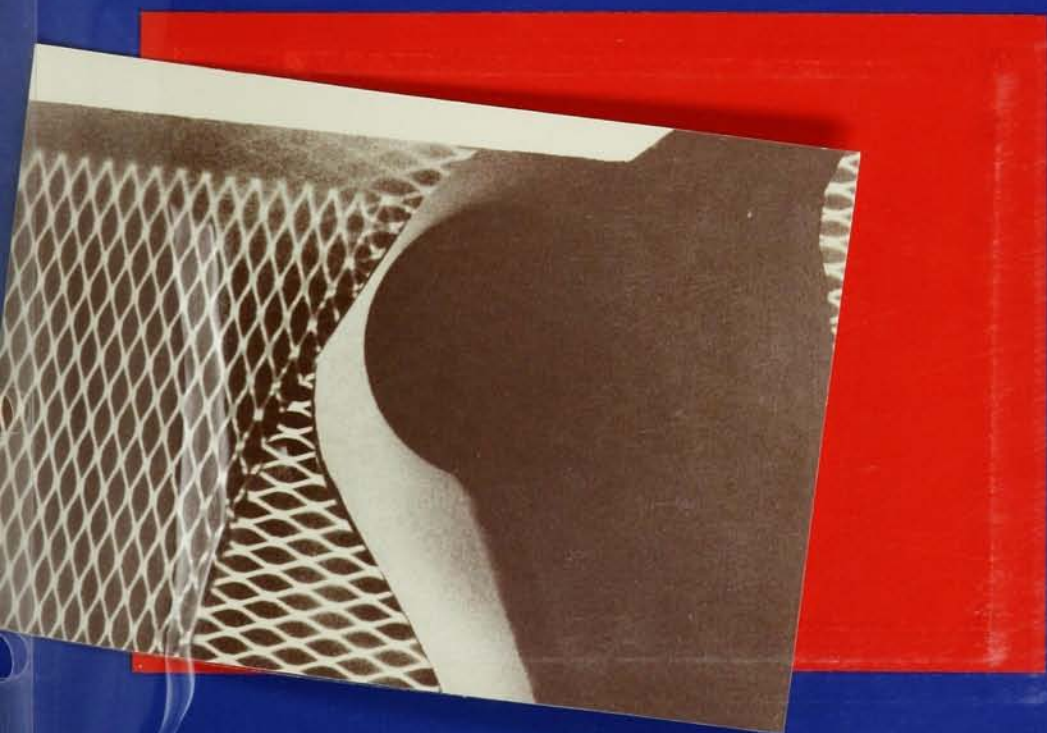
"Siamese Grid"

3½' x 5'

Acrylic, lacquer spray,
silver leaf

Aiming for a total fusion of figure and ground, I silouetted the two profile figures and then played with patterned perception. The resulting composition is not altogether recognizable. One tends to not analyze this painting according to the thematic material presented, but rather as a total unit, an emblematic configuration.

This effect is provocative. I like it. And I also favor this work because of its immaculate surface. Of all my work, this last painting comes closest to being technically perfect.



The photo silkscreen.

(Elizabeth figure)

This technique, only recently developed, is rather complicated. I shall only briefly outline the procedures. For further information on the subject, one can refer to any recent publication on the art of silkscreening.

- A. Photograph image and develop the negatives.
- B. Transfer negative image to a Kodalith positive.
- C. Expose Kodalith to a light-sensitive sheet labeled Hi -Fi Green, by means of an arc - lamp. Ultra - violet lamps may also be used, but the exposure time is greatly increased.
- D. Develop Hi -Fi Green in luke warm water, and press the sheet onto the silk.
- E. When the Hi -Fi Green sheet is thoroughly dry, strip off its plastic backing. The resulting image will be a positive, high contrast translation of the original photograph.
- F. Begin printing. The photo - positive can withstand an infinite number of runs.



Stenciling material most often used:

- A. Grid
- B. Aluminum shelf
- C. Garbage pail lid
- D. Styrofoam packaging material
- E. Pierced colunder
- F. Paper cut-out
- G. Masonite circle

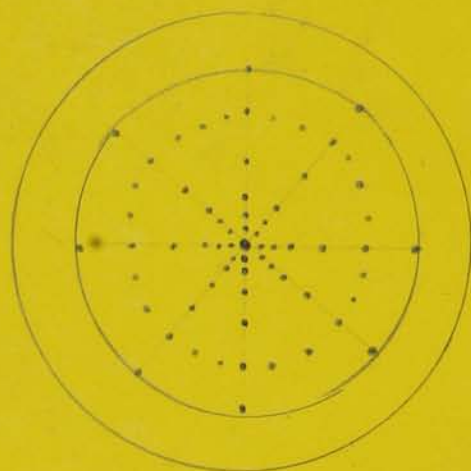


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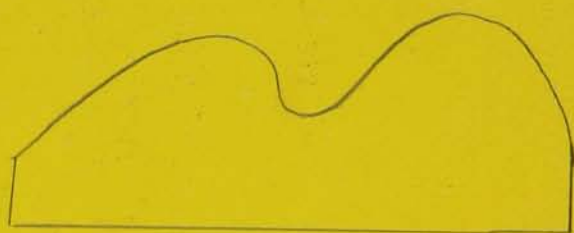
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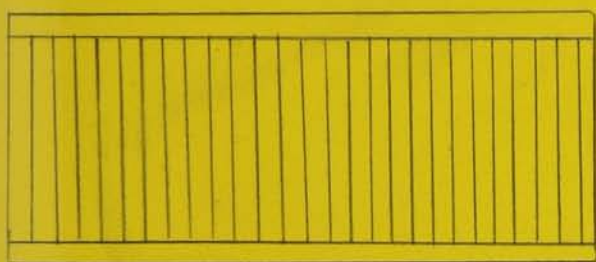
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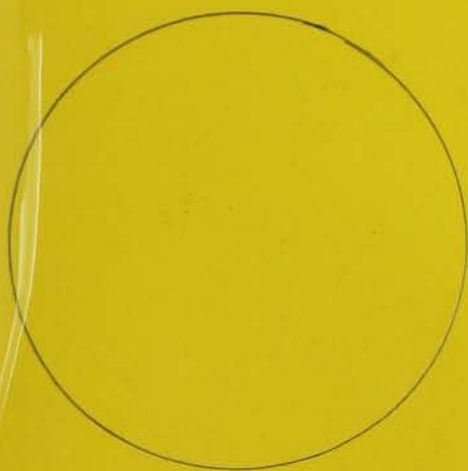
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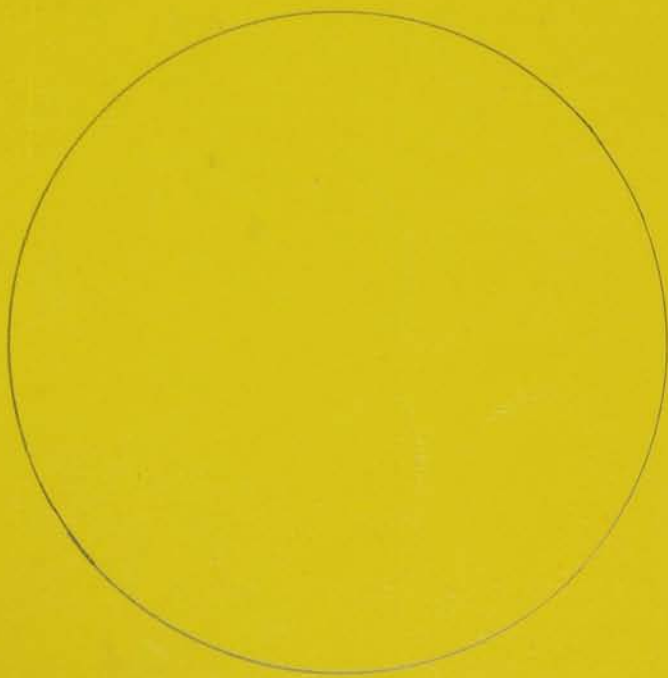
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